

III.

LETTER FROM R. P. TO JONATHAN CORWIN.

SALISBURY, Aug. 9, 1692.

HONORED SIR, — According as in my former to you I hinted that I held myself obliged to give you some farther account of my rude though solemn thoughts of that great case now before you, the happy management whereof do so much conduce to the glory of God, the safety and tranquillity of the country, besides what I have said in my former and the enclosed, I further humbly present to consideration the doubtfulness and unsafety of admitting spectre testimony against the life of any that are of blameless conversation, and plead innocent, from the uncertainty of them and the incredulity of them; for as for diabolical visions, apparitions, or representations, they are more commonly false and delusive than real, and cannot be known when they are real and when feigned, but by the Devil's report; and then not to be believed, because he is the father of lies.

1. Either the organ of the eye is abused and the senses deluded, so as to think they do see or hear some thing or person, when indeed they do not, and this is frequent with common jugglers.

2. The Devil himself appears in the shape and likeness of a person or thing, when it is not the person or thing itself; so he did in the shape of Samuel.

3. And sometimes persons or things themselves do really appear, but how it is possible for any one to give a true testimony, which possibly did see neither shape nor person, but were deluded; and if they did see any thing, they know not whether it was the person or but his shape. All that can be rationally or truly said in such a case is this, — that I did see the shape or likeness of such a person, if my senses or eyesight were not deluded: and they can honestly say no more, because they know no more (except the Devil tells them more); and if he do, they can but say he told them so. But the matter is still incredible: first, because it is but their saying the Devil told them so; if he did so tell them, yet the verity of the thing remains still unproved, because the Devil was a liar and a murderer (John viii. 44), and may tell these lies to murder an innocent person.

But this case seems to be solved by an assertion of some, that affirm that the Devil do not or cannot appear in the shape of a godly person, to do hurt: others affirm the contrary, and say that he can and often have so done, of

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which they give many instances for proof of what they say; which if granted, the case remains yet unsolved, and yet the very hinge upon which that weighty case depends. To which I humbly say: First, That I do lament that such a point should be so needful to be determined, which seems not probable, if possible, to be determined to infallible satisfaction for want of clear Scripture to decide it by, though very rational to be believed according to rules; as, for instance, if divers examples are alleged of the shape of persons that have been seen, of whom there is ample testimony that they lived and died in the faith, yet, saith the objecter, 'tis possible they may be hypocrites, therefore the proof not infallible: and as it may admit of such an objection against the reasons given on the affirmative, much more may the same objection be made against the negative, for which they can or do give no reason at all, nor can a negative be proved (therefore difficult to be determined to satisfy infallibly); but, seeing it must be discussed, I humbly offer these few words: First, I humbly conceive that the saints on earth are not more privileged in that case than the saints in heaven; but the Devil may appear in the shape of a saint in heaven, namely, in the shape of Samuel (1 Sam. xxviii. 13, 14); therefore he can or may represent the shape of a saint that is upon the earth. Besides, there may be innocent persons that are not saints, and their innocency ought to be their security, as well as godly men's; and I hear nobody question but the Devil may take their shape.

Secondly, It doth not hurt any man or woman to present the shape or likeness of an innocent person, more than for a limner or carver to draw his picture, and show it, if he do not in that form do some evil (nor then neither) if the laws of man do not oblige him to suffer for what the Devil doth in his shape, the laws of God do not.

Thirdly, The Devil had power, by God's permission, to take the very person of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the day or time of his humiliation, and carry him from place to place, and tempted him with temptations of horrid blasphemy, and yet left him innocent. Why may we not suppose the like may be done to a good man? And why not much more appear in his shape (or make folk think it is his shape, when indeed it is not), and yet the person be innocent, being far enough off, and not knowing of it, nor would consent if he had known it, his profession and conversation being otherwise?

Fourthly, I suppose 'tis granted by all, that the person of one that is dead cannot appear, because the soul and body are separated, and so the person is dissolved, and so ceaseth to be: and it is as certain that the person of the living cannot be in two places at one time, but he that is at Boston cannot be at Salem or Cambridge at the same time; but as the malice and envy in the Devil makes it his business to seek whom he may devour, so no question but he doth infuse the same quality into those that leave Jesus Christ to embrace him, that they do envy those that are innocent, and upon that account be as ready to say and swear that they did see them as the Devil is to present their shape to them. Add but this also, that, when they are once under his power, he puts them on headlong (they must needs go whom the Devil drives, saith

the proverb), and the reason is clear, — because they are taken captive by him, to do his will. And we see, by woful and undeniable experience, both in the afflicted persons and the confessors, some of them, that he torments them at his pleasure, to force them to accuse others. Some are apt to doubt they do but counterfeit; but, poor souls! I am utterly of another mind, and I lament them with all my heart; but, take which you please, the case is the same as to the main issue. For, if they counterfeit, the wickedness is the greater in them, and the less in the Devil: but if they be compelled to it by the Devil, against their wills, then the sin is the Devil's, and the sufferings theirs; but if their testimonies be allowed of, to make persons guilty by, the lives of innocent persons are alike in danger by them, which is the solemn consideration that do disquiet the country.

Now, that the only wise God may so direct you in all, that he may have glory, the country peace and safety, and your hands strengthened in that great work, is the desire and constant prayer of your humble servant, B. P., who shall no further trouble you at present.

Position. — That to put a witch to death is the command of God, and therefore the indispensable duty of man, — namely, the magistrate (Ex. xxii. 18); which, granted, resolves two questions that I have heard made by some: —

First, Whether there are any such creatures as witches in the world. Secondly, If there be, whether they can be known to be such by men: both which must be determined on the affirmative, or else that commandment were in vain.

Position Second. — That it must be witches that are put to death, and not innocent persons: "Thou shalt not condemn the innocent nor the righteous" (Ex. xxiii. 7).

Query. — Which premised, it brings to this query, — namely, how a witch may be known to be a witch.

Answer. — First, By the mouth of two or three witnesses (Deut. xix. 15; Matt. xviii. 16; Deut. xvii. 6). Secondly, They may be known by their own confession, being *compos mentis*, and not under horrid temptation to self-murder (2 Sam. xvi.; Josh. vii. 16).

Query Second. — What is it that those two or three witnesses must swear? Must they swear that such a person is a witch? Will that do the thing, as is vulgarly supposed?

Answer. — I think that is too unsafe to go by, as well as hard to be done by the advised: First, because it would expose the lives of all alike to the pleasure or passion of those that are minded to take them away; secondly, because that, in such a testimony, the witnesses are not only informers in matter of fact, but sole judges of the crime, — which is the proper work of the judges, and not of witnesses.

Query Third. — What is it that the witnesses must testify in the case, to prove one to be a witch?

Answer. — They must witness the person did put forth some act which, if true, was an act of witchcraft, or familiarity with the Devil, the witness attest the fact to be upon his certain knowledge, and the judges to judge that fact to be such a crime.

Query Fourth. — What acts are they which must be proved to be committed by a person, that shall be counted legal proof of witchcraft, or familiarity with the Devil?

Answer. — This I do profess to be so hard a question, for want of light from the Word of God and laws of men, that I do not know what to say to it; and therefore humbly conceive, that, in such a difficulty, it may be more safe, for the present, to let a guilty person live till further discovery, than to put an innocent person to death.

First, Because a guilty person may afterward be discovered, and so put to death; but an innocent person to be put to death cannot be brought again to life when once dead.

Secondly, Because secret things belong to God only, but revealed things to us and to our children. And though it be so difficult sometimes, yet witches there are, and may be known by some acts or other put forth by them, that may render them such; for Scripture examples, I can remember but few in the Old Testament, besides Balaam (Num. xxii. 6, xxxi. 16).

First, The sorcerers of Egypt could not tell the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, though he told them his dream (Gen. xli 8): his successors afterwards had sorcerers, that by enchantments did, first, turn their rods into serpents (Exod. vii. 11, 12); second, turned water into blood; thirdly, brought frogs upon the land of Egypt (Exod. viii. 7).

Thirdly, Nebuchadnezzar's magicians said that they would tell him the interpretation, if he would tell them his dream (Dan. iv. 7); but the king did not believe them (ver. 8, 9).

Fourthly, The Witch of Endor raised the Devil, in the likeness of Samuel, to tell Saul his fortune; and Saul made use of him accordingly (1 Sam. xxviii. 8, 11-15); and, as for New Testament, I see very little of that nature. Our Lord Jesus Christ did cast out many devils, and so did his disciples, both while he was upon earth and afterward, of which some were dreadfully circumstanced (Mark ix. 18; Mark v. 2-5); but of witches, we only read of four mentioned in the apostles' time: first, Simon Magus (Acts viii. 9, 11); secondly, Elymas the sorcerer (Acts xiii. 6, 8); thirdly, the seven sons of Sceva, a Jew, that were vagabond Jews, — exorcists (Acts xix. 13-16); fourthly, the girl which, by a spirit of divination, brought her master much gain (Acts xvi. 16), whether it were by telling fortunes or finding out lost things, as our cunning men do, is not said; but something it was that was done by that spirit which was in her, which, being cast out, she could not do. Now, whatever was done by any of these, by the help of the Devil, or by virtue of familiarity with him, or that the Devil did do by their consent or instigation, it is that which, the like being now proved to be done by others, is legal conviction of witchcraft, or familiarity with the Devil.

As I remember, Mr. Perkins apprehends witchcraft may be sometimes committed by virtue of an implicit covenant with the Devil, though there be not explicit covenant visibly between them; namely, by using such words and gestures whereby they do intimate to the Devil what they would have him do, and he doth it.

3. To tell events contingent, or to bring any thing to pass by supernatural means, or by no means.

I have heard of some that make a circle, and mumble over some uncouth words; and some that have been spiteful and suspicious persons, that have sent for a handful of thatch from the house or barn of him that they have owed a spite to, and the house have been burnt as they had burnt the thatch that they fetched.

When Captain Smith was cast away in the ship built by Mr. Stevens at Gloucester, many years ago, it was said that the woman that was accused for doing it did put a dish in a pail of water, and sent her girl several times to see the motion of the dish, till at last it was turned over, and then the woman said, "Now Smith is gone," or "is cast away."

A neighbor of mine, who was a Hampshire man, told me that a suspected woman desired something of some of the family, which being denied, she either muttered or threatened, and some evil suddenly followed, and they put her into a cart to carry her to Winchester; and, when they had gone a little way, the team could not move the cart, though in plain ground. The master commanded to carry a knitch of straw, and burn her in the cart; which to avoid, she said they should go along, and they did. This they did several times before they came to Winchester, of which passages the men that went with her gave their oaths, and she was executed.

Some have been transformed into dogs, cats, hares, hogs, and other creatures; and in those shapes have sometimes received wounds which have made them undeniably guilty, and so confessed. Sometimes having their imps sucking them, or infallible tokens that they are sucked, in the search of which great caution to be given, because of some superfluities of nature, and diseases that people are incident unto, as the piles, &c., of which the judges are, upon the testimony of the witnesses, to determine what of crime is proved by any of these circumstances, with many other, in which God is pleased many times, by some overt acts, to bring to light that secret wickedness to apparent conviction, sometimes by their own necessitated confession, whereby those that he hath commanded to be put to death may be known to be such, which, when known, then it is a duty to put them to death, and not before, though they were as guilty before as then.

There are two queries more with respect to what is proper to us in this juncture of time, of which we have no account of the like being common at other times, or in other places; namely, these, —

Query Fifth. — The fifth query is, what we are to think of those persons at Salem, or the Village, before whom people are brought for detection, or otherwise to be concerned with them, in order to their being apprehended or acquitted.

Answer.—That I am, of all men, the least able to give any conjecture about it, because I do not know it, having myself never seen it, nor know nothing of it but by report, in which there must be supposed a possibility of some mistake, in part or in whole; but that which I have here heard is this: First, That they do tell who are witches, of which some they know, and some they do not. Secondly, They tell who did torment such and such a person, though they know not the person. Thirdly, They are tormented themselves by the looks of persons that are present, and recovered again by the touching of them. Fourthly, That, if they look to them, they fall down tormented; but, if the persons accused look from them, they recover, or do not fall into that torment. Fifthly, They can tell when a person is coming before they see them, and what clothes they have, and some what they have done for several years past, which nobody else ever accused them with, nor do not yet think them guilty of. Sixthly, That the dead out of their graves do appear unto them, and tell them that they have been murdered, and require them to see them to be revenged on the murderers, which they name to them; some of which persons are well known to die their natural deaths, and publicly buried in the sight of all men. Now, if these things be so, I thus affirm,—

First, That whatsoever is done by them that is supernatural, is either divine or diabolical.

Secondly, That nothing is, or can be, divine, but what have God's stamp upon it, to which he refers for trial (Isa. viii. 19, 20): "If they speak not according to these, there is no light in them."

Thirdly, And by that rule none of these actions of theirs have any warrant in God's word, but condemned wholly.

First, It is utterly unlawful to inquire of the dead, or to be informed by them (Isa. viii. 19). It was an act of the Witch of Endor to raise the dead, and of a reprobate Saul to inquire of him (1 Sam. xxviii. 8, 11-14; Deut. xviii. 11).

Secondly, It is a like evil to seek to them that have familiar spirits (Lev. xix. 31). It was the sin of Saul in the forementioned place (1 Sam. xxviii. 8); and of wicked Manasses (2 Kings, xxi. 6).

Thirdly, No more is it likely that their racking and tormenting should be done by God or good angels, but by the Devil, whose manner have ever been to be so employed. Witness his dealing with the poor child (Mark ix. 17, 19, 20-22); and with the man that was possessed by him (Mark v. 2-5); besides what he did to Job (Job ii. 7); and all the lies that he told against him to the very face of God.

Fourthly, The same may be rationally said of all the rest. Who should tell them things that they do not see, but the Devil; especially when some things that they tell are false and mistaken?

Query Sixth.—These things premised, it now comes to the last and greatest question or query; namely, How shall it be known when the Devil do any of these acts of his own proper motion, without human concurrence,

consent, or instigation, and when he doth it by the suggestion or consent of any person? This question, well resolved, would do our business.

First, That the Devil can do acts supernatural without the furtherance of him by human consent or concurrence; but men or women cannot do them without the help of the Devil (must be granted). That granted, it follows, that the Devil is always the doer, but whether abetted in it by anybody is uncertain.

Secondly, Will it be sufficient for the Devil himself to say such a man or woman set him a work to torment such a person by looking upon him? Is the Devil a competent witness in such a case?

Thirdly, Or are those that are tormented by him legal witnesses to say that the Devil doth it by the procurement of such a person, whenas they know nothing about it but what comes to them from the Devil (that torments them)?

Fourthly, May we believe the witches that do accuse any one because they say so (can the fruit be better than the tree)? If the root of all their knowledge be the Devil, what must their testimony be?

Fifthly, Their testimony may be legal against themselves, because they know what themselves do, but cannot know what another doth but by information from the Devil: I mean in such cases when the person accused do deny it, and his conversation is blameless (Prov. xviii. 5; Prov. xix. 5).

First, It is directly contrary to the use of reason, the law of nature, and principles of humanity, to deny it, and plead innocent, when accused of witchcraft, and yet, at the same time, to be acting witchcraft in the sight of all men, when they know their lives lie at stake by doing it. Self-interest teaches every one better.

Secondly, It is contrary to the Devil's nature, or common practice, to accuse witches. They are a considerable part of his kingdom, which would fall, if divided against itself (Matt. xii. 26); except we think he that spake the words understood not what he said (which were blasphemy to think); or that those common principles or maxims are now changed; or that the Devil have changed his nature, and is now become a reformer to purge out witches out of the world, out of the country, and out of the churches; and is to be believed, though a liar and a murderer from the beginning, and also though his business is going about continually, seeking whom he may destroy (1 Pet. v. 8); and his peculiar subject of his accusation are the brethren: called the accuser of the brethren.

Objection. — God do sometimes bring things to light by his providence in a way extraordinary.

Answer. — It is granted God have so done, and brought hidden things to light, which, upon examination, have been proved or confessed, and so the way is clear for their execution; but what is that to this case, where the Devil is accuser and witness?